

223hh- Practice Of Generosity

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Q: Is generosity beneficial?

Nyanamoli: The act of generosity is an act of giving things up. It makes you and others feel good. It makes you give things up and feel good on account of it. Giving up something of yours, part of your wealth, earnings, possessions, you end up enjoying the fact that somebody is happy on account of it. It's a less constricted state of mind.

There can be many layers of giving. Some people give by expecting something back, but it doesn't matter. In itself, the phenomenon of giving, still requires giving up, and that thread remains wholesome throughout the giving, even if I give it with the desire for some future benefit, it's still good to give. Sure, the best way to give is when you are completely unattached to what you are giving. ([An 7:49](#))

Q: I think generosity also provides the donor a sense of security.

Nm: It does and it is an uplifting act. It's a greater state of mind than the mind of one who doesn't give. The mind that doesn't give always revolves around habits of taking, possessing, owning, protecting, worrying, trying to control things that are unownable, things which cannot be protected, and can be taken away. The only way to sustain that state is to keep doubling down, constricting the mind more and more and more, which leads to a bad destination.

Giving prevents that from happening. Giving is like a pressure release valve to that constriction, it will help your mind to open up. The act of giving requires you to let go. When you give something up you receive a greater elevation of mind, because you force your mind to back off, step away from anything that you have been constricting yourself over.

The true purpose of generosity is to force your mind to expand. That's why generosity, friendliness, all that goes hand in hand. It's a less limiting, narrow state of mind.

Q: Why would a person be stingy?

Nm: Insecurity, fear of non-control. By "holding on" they get a false sense of security, but it doesn't last long because what they are holding on to is not secure. Their stinginess is the proliferation of the sense of self that is being threatened by even little things that it can't have. The more it proliferates, the more it will need for its maintenance, and the more sensitive it will become. That's why you have people who have many things and still it's never enough because they have become psychologically locked into that pattern of always seeing that it's never enough because deep down they know that their attachments cannot be owned to begin with. You can have great amounts of wealth and so on, but fundamentally, you will feel that it's not in your control. Deep down, you know that. Why? Because you could die at any given moment, the economy could crash, thieves could take it away and so on. All of that is implicit in your 'ownership'. If you don't own it, how can you be affected if it changes or goes away?

That's exactly the whole point of the encouragement that the Buddha gave to some monks in a forest:

“Bhikkhus, whatever is not yours, abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness. And what is it, bhikkhus, that is not yours? Form is not yours: abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness. Feeling is not yours ... Perception is not yours ... Intentions are not yours ... Consciousness is not yours: abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness.

“Suppose people were to carry off the grass, sticks, branches, and foliage in this Jeta’s Grove, or to burn them, or to do with them as they wish. Would you think: ‘People are carrying us off, or burning us, or doing with us as they wish’?”

“No, venerable sir. For what reason? Because, venerable sir, that is neither our self nor what belongs to our self.”

“So too, bhikkhus, form is not yours ... consciousness is not yours: abandon it. When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness.” -[Sn22.33](#)

People who are stingy or miserly, lack wisdom in that regard, they don’t see that they cannot fundamentally own anything, they ignore that fact. And as a result, they keep doubling down on the action of more ownership and more control.

Q: “General Sīha went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: “Is it possible, lord, to point out a fruit of giving visible in the here & now?”

1- “It is possible, Sīha. One who is generous, a master of giving, is dear & charming to people at large. And the fact that who is generous, a master of giving, is dear & charming to people at large: This is a fruit of giving visible in the here & now.

2 - “And further, good people, people of integrity, admire one who is generous, a master of giving. And the fact that good people, people of integrity, admire one who is generous, a master of giving: This, too, is a fruit of giving visible in the here & now.

3- “And further, the fine reputation of one who is generous, a master of giving, is spread far & wide. And the fact that the fine reputation of one who is generous, a master of giving, is spread far & wide: This, too, is a fruit of giving visible in the here & now.

4 - “And further, when one who is generous, a master of giving, approaches any assembly of people—noble warriors, brahmans, householders, or contemplative, he does so confidently and without embarrassment. And the fact that when one who is generous, a master of giving, approaches any assembly of people, noble warriors, brahmans, householders, or contemplatives, he does so confidently and without embarrassment: This, too, is a fruit of giving visible in the here & now.

5 - “And further, at the break-up of the body, after death, one who is generous, a master of giving, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world. And the fact that at the break-up of the body, after death, one who is generous, a master of giving, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world: This is a fruit of giving in the next life.”

When this was said, General Sīha said to the Blessed One: “As for the four fruits of giving visible in the here & now that have been pointed out by the Blessed One, it’s not the case that I go by conviction in the Blessed One with regard to them. I know them, too. I am generous, a master of giving, dear & charming to people at large. I am generous, a master of giving; good people, people of integrity, admire me. I am generous, a master of giving, and my fine reputation is spread far & wide: ‘Sīha is generous, a doer, a supporter of the Saṅgha.’ I am generous, a master of giving, and when I approach any assembly of people—noble warriors, brahmans, householders, or contemplatives—I do so confidently & without embarrassment.

“But when the Blessed One says to me, ‘At the break-up of the body, after death, one who is generous, a master of giving, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world,’ that I do not know. That is where I go by conviction in the Blessed One.”

“So it is, Sīha. So it is. At the break-up of the body, after death, one who is generous, a master of giving, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world.”

One who gives is dear. People at large admire him. He gains honor. His status grows. He enters an assembly unembarrassed. He is a confident, non-stingy man.

Therefore the wise give gifts. Seeking happiness they would subdue the stain of miserliness. Established in the three-fold heavenly world, they enjoy themselves long in fellowship with the devas. Having made the opportunity for themselves, having done what is skillful, then when they fall from here they fare on, self-radiant, in Nandana [the garden of the devas]. There they delight, enjoy, are joyful, replete with the five sensuality strands. Having followed the words of the sage who is Such, they enjoy themselves in heaven, the disciples of the One Well-Gone.” - [An5.34](#)

Nm: Why would you become confident? Why would you not be as confident if you're not generous? Why would generosity make you more confident in any assembly?

Because it's a less limiting state of mind. Lack of confidence is an extremely constricted state of mind, whereby you are afraid and insecure in regard to many things most of the time. However, through generosity, you're forcing your mind to expand, and when the state of mind is more expansive, it is less constricted, less afraid, less able to twitch to the left or to the right on the basis of some random perception. An expansive mind can take more. The more limitless the mind, the more confident you will be, not conceited, but confident, and simply less moved, because the mind is broader.

Q: In that sense, the expanded mind of generosity is the cure for social anxiety.

Nm: Exactly, social anxiety because of which I don't engage with others because of which my anxiety increases because of which I don't engage with others. It's a vicious circle. Well, generosity is a nice way to engage with others, and in that way you start breaking the vicious circle of anxiously non-engaging with others. And even a little act of generosity is enough to set your mind at least to some extent, in that direction of expansion. By being generous, you force your mind to broaden.

Through generosity you get to override those thoughts of fear. You get to elevate your mind above those thoughts even if those thoughts are present. And then it doesn't matter if people laugh at you and so on. What actually matters is that you actually did the generous deed. That's why generosity is a practice. It's not like you do a generous act and suddenly have this religious experience and everyone likes you. Of course, somebody who has been very miserly, it might feel like that, i.e. any little expansion from an extremely constricted mind will feel like a religious experience.

Generosity is a practice. If you do it, if you develop it alongside wisdom, i.e. you don't just start giving everything carelessly away, when your own family's starving or go and give all your money to a casino. But rather, when you can give, if you earn more than you need, you can always dedicate part of those earnings towards giving, and you don't have to overthink it, you don't make demands, just find what it's good to give, who can be helped, and do it, and then practice doing it. In that way, you will start building up that behaviour of generosity, that will then become a quality which decorates your mind, and not just when you are giving, even generally, you will know yourself as a generous person, that knowledge, that decoration will be there in the background. That's exactly one of the benefits. That knowledge will be in others as well. It's not like you have to have an audience when you're giving all the time. But if you are practising giving sufficiently enough, it will be known. But you wouldn't care whether it's known to others or not, but it will be known by you. That's a fact. That's why Buddha listed it as one of the inevitable benefits.

“...Then there is the case where you recollect your own generosity: ‘It is a gain, a great gain for me, that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness, freely generous, open handed, delighting in being magnanimous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms.’ At any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, his mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. His mind heads straight, based on generosity. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones gains a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, happiness arises. In one whose mind is happy, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes composed...” - [An 11:12](#)

It's a practice that should be developed and encouraged for individual benefit of your own mind expansion and benefit of others. You can also encourage others to be generous by setting a good example, which will then in return, help their own minds from escaping the state of insecure constricted stinginess.

“...This world is on fire with aging, illness, & death. With the world thus on fire with aging, illness, & death, any restraint of body, speech, and mind practiced here will be one's shelter, cave, island, & refuge after death in the world beyond.”

When a house is aflame, the vessel salvaged is the one that will be of use, not the one left there to burn. So when the world is on fire with aging & death, you should salvage (your wealth) by giving: What's given is well salvaged. When you're restrained herein body, speech and mind; when you make merit while still alive: That will be for your happiness after death.” - [AN 3:53](#)
